

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Editor
Director
Director

A man's face may be his fortune, but an established name is rarely an encumbrance.



SHE waited at the foot of my hospital bed for a full minute before she spoke. "You still don't know who you are? Or what happened to you?"

"No."

"Your name is Eric," she said. "Eric Belmont."

"Is it?" I indicated the bandages covering my face. "How can you tell?"

She had raven hair and cool violet eyes. "That scar on your arm. You were twelve when you took a

bad fall off your favorite horse."

I looked at my arm and then at her. "And who are you?"

"Your fiancée."

Beneath my bandages, I managed a smile. I was not Eric Belmont, she was not my fiancée, and as for the scar, I got that from a pair of football cleats in high

By Jack Ritchie

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school. "Maybe it'll all come back to me in time," I said.

"Of course. And I'll help you."

"How did you find me?"

"You were due in from Paris two days ago. When you didn't appear, naturally I worried and did some checking. I discovered that you stepped off the plane when it arrived here, but then apparently you just disappeared. I phoned the hospitals. None of them had an Eric Belmont listed. However, this one did mention an amnesia case, and I was given your general physical description."

"What did my face look like before this happened?"

She opened her handbag and removed a snapshot.

Eric Belmont didn't look too bad; better than I had. "Will I ever look like that again?"

"Yes. Dr. Hassett is going to take care of everything. He's one of the finest plastic surgeons in the state."

"Tell me more about myself."

"You're thirty-three and a vice president in Belmont Chemicals. Your father, Andrew, owns the firm."

I smiled again. Until three days ago, Duke Nelson and I had been running the Blue Parrot nightclub just outside of St. Louis. "Any relatives beside my father?"

"None."

"I suppose he'll be here to see me?"

"No. I thought it best to tell him that you are still in Paris. He's very ill and confined to bed. I've explained the situation to Dr. Hassett and Sergeant Turner and they've agreed to cooperate as far as possible. We don't want anyone discovering your condition and passing on that information to your father. You will be transferred to a private hospital under another name."

I glanced at the snapshot again. A new face? Why not?

I had three men to kill and I didn't want any of them to know, until it was too late, that Sam Egan was still alive.

They stopped me early in the morning as I left the club. It was dark, but not so dark that I couldn't make out the automatics in their hands. I had seen the two of them around before—Shantz and Jardine.

Shantz moved his gun slightly. "Just keep walking to your car. Get inside the back and lie down."

I did what I was told without making any argument.

Shantz tied my hands and legs. "Don't you want to ask any questions?"

"I suppose you two have the bright idea of keeping me in storage someplace until somebody

buys me back for twenty or thirty grand?"

"You think hopeful, don't you? But I'll clue you in. Maybe you should have sold your half of the club to your partner, like he asked."

I turned my head. "I didn't care much for Duke's offer at the time he made it. But thinking it over now, I feel that Duke and I could have a reasonable discussion."

Shantz laughed. "You missed the boat, Sam. Duke's worked himself up to handling the problem this way now, and also maybe he thinks it'll be cheaper." He spoke to Jardine. "All right, Al. Follow in our car."

Shantz put the gag over my mouth and then got behind the wheel. He eased the car onto the highway.

After what seemed like about fifteen minutes, I felt the car turn and heard the crunch of gravel under the tires. The car stopped.

Shantz opened the door and dragged me out. The sliver of moon showed me that we were at the edge of a high bluff. Jardine parked behind my car and joined us.

Shantz took the gag out of my mouth. "Here's the preview, Sam. We put you in the car, roll it over the edge here and let it splash into the deep water. If some scuba

diver taking exercise happens to find you, it'll read like you fell asleep or something, lost control of the car, and happened to drown."

"I was driving with my hands tied? And maybe with a bullet hole in me?"

"You're not going to have a bullet in you," Jardine said. "And your hands won't be tied."

I ran my tongue over my dry lips. "Look, Al, how much are you two getting for this?"

"Ten thousand."

"I'll double that," I said quickly.

Jardine seemed to consider the offer and then shook his head. "You'll promise anything right now, but it'll turn out to be just air. We'll do this job like we were hired to."

Shantz moved closer and swung a piece of tire chain experimentally. He showed teeth. "This is the part of my work I like."

Jardine frowned. "We just want to put him out, not kill him. Take it easy."

Shantz didn't.

I woke just as the car slipped over the edge. It tumbled and bounded down the sharp slope and I was tossed around inside. There was a second or two of near silence as the sedan plunged through the air and then the hard jolt as it hit the water.

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AT FACE VALUE

bottom upright on its wheels and stayed that way. I could feel the water squirting through the cracked windows.

In the darkness, I groped frantically for the door handle but when I found it, I hesitated. I knew they'd be waiting and watching. If they saw me come up they'd put a bullet through my head.

I released the door handle and knelt on the front seat. I put my face up close to the roof and waited. The water rose quickly to my waist, my chest, over my shoulders, and then it stopped. I was beneath twenty feet of water in the air pocket created under the roof of my car.

The impulse to roll down one of the windows and get out of there was almost overwhelming, but I fought down the panic. My left arm seemed dead, and there was a sharp pain in my chest whenever I took a breath.

Five minutes went by. Ten.

When the air began getting stale I decided that it was now or never. I took a deep breath, ducked under the water, and forced open one of the doors. When I broke the surface of the water, I looked up.

They were gone.

I used an awkward one-armed side stroke to get me to land. It took another half-hour to work my way back up to the gravel road.

What should I do now? Go to the police?

No. This was something I wanted to take care of myself, in my own way; but not now. I touched the pain that was my face. I'd have to get away someplace where Duke and Jardine and Shantz couldn't get to me, and let things grow back together again.

I began walking down the road and after a while I looked down at a railroad yard in the valley. I watched a chain of empties being put together. They were going someplace and it didn't matter to me where that might be. I made my way down and waited in the shadows. When I thought nobody was looking I pulled myself into one of the freights and closed the door. Eventually the cars began to move and kept moving. I lay down and closed my eyes.

I slept—or passed out—and woke a dozen times before the freight finally stopped. I staggered to my feet and slid open the door. It was night again, and we appeared to be on the outskirts of a city.

I lowered myself carefully to the trackbed and began walking toward the lights. I was feverish and my mouth was parched. The streets were deserted and a clock in one of the store windows told me that it was after two in the morning.

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thought I might pass out. I took out my wallet and dropped it down a grated sewer. I didn't want to be found helpless and identified, to be sent back to where Duke and his boys could get at me again. I sat down on the curb.

A squad car appeared at the intersection, the wheels turned, and it eased my way. It stopped a few feet from me and both officers got out. Their eyes widened when they looked down at me.

"Lord," one of them breathed. "What the hell happened to you?"

When they finally got through working on me at the hospital, they put me into a clean bed and I closed my eyes. It was daylight when I woke, and I estimated from the sunlight that it must be late afternoon.

The nurse saw that I was conscious and left the room. She returned with two men, one of them obviously a doctor. The other wore a dark suit.

The latter sat down beside me. "I'm Sergeant Turner of the Police Department. I'd like to ask you a few questions and maybe we can find out what happened to you."

I looked at the doctor. "How much am I damaged?"

"You've got a broken arm, some fractured ribs, a concussion, and . . . a severely lacerated face."

Turner had a notebook in his hand. "What's your name?"

I let about thirty seconds go by and then I said, "I don't know. I can't remember."

His eyes went to the doctor. "Shock?"

The doctor seemed faintly puzzled. "Apparently."

Turner tried again. "Could you tell us what happened to you?"

I let more time pass before I said, "I don't remember anything. Nothing at all until that squad car picked me up."

Turner sighed and closed the notebook. "We'll just have to wait until he comes out of it."

They were both back the next morning and I still had nothing to tell them.

The doctor was thoughtful. "If it were shock, he should be out of it by now."

Turner nodded. "Amnesia?"

The doctor hesitated. "Possibly."

Turner regarded me skeptically. "It's just a personal opinion, but I have the feeling that nine out of ten of these amnesia cases are faked—like when a man decides to run away from his debts or his wife, and then after a while he thinks things over and wants to go back—but the only way he can account for walking away is to claim that he had amnesia."

The doctor got out his light and

took a look at my eyes. "There are two types of true amnesia. One is induced by emotional trauma; the other has a physical basis. In the first case, the victim invariably snaps out of it after a while. The second can be much more . . . ah . . . difficult."

"You mean it could be permanent?" Turner asked.

Possibly because the doctor didn't want to worry me, he said, "In rare cases."

Turner got up. "Well, we'll take his fingerprints and send them to Washington. Maybe we can get some help there."

That was all right with me. My prints weren't in anybody's files.

That night Daria Winters came to me and told me that I was Eric Belmont.

The next months were long ones. When Dr. Hassett wasn't working on my face, he was waiting for parts of it to heal; and Daria saw me almost every day, reminding me of all the things Eric Belmont ought to know about himself.

I learned about the schools he'd gone to, the friends and enemies he had, the things he liked and disliked. I read between the lines, too.

After one of our sessions, I asked a question that had been bothering me for some time. "Daria, why the hell did you ever become engaged to me?"

Her eyes flickered. "What do you mean?"

I watched smoke from my cigarette drift toward the ceiling. "I've been lying here, reevaluating myself and all that sort of inside stuff, and I've come to the conclusion that I, the great Eric Belmont, am fundamentally a very weak person."

She shook her head quickly. "No, Eric. It's just that you're . . ." She groped for a comforting word, but couldn't find it.

"And besides that," I said, "it also seems—from stray words you drop here and there—that fidelity to one woman is not one of my rare virtues."

She looked away. "You don't have to tell me about them."

I smiled. "How could I possibly do that? I have amnesia, you know."

Daria was present when the bandages were permanently removed from my face.

I examined myself in a hand mirror. "Am I the old Eric Belmont?"

She kissed me lightly. "Of course you are."

In the bathroom, I changed to the new clothes Daria had brought to the hospital. I came out. "Are we now going to tell dear Dad that my face has been repaired, but that I still suffer from amnesia?"

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She shook her head. "No. I think that it might—even now—be too much of a shock to him. Especially the fact of amnesia. As far as he is concerned, you are arriving home on a plane today."

"What excuse am I going to give for being gone so long?"

"You never did have a reputation for dependability, Eric. You often stayed away for rather prolonged periods of time whenever you found something . . . interesting . . . to keep you away."

"I suppose you faked a few letters to keep Daddy from worrying?"

"Of course."

I went to the mirror and examined my face again. Yes, I was ready to leave now. It was time to take care of my own business. I watched her reflection. "Daria, whatever happened to the real Eric Belmont?"

She paled. "What do you mean?"

I turned. "I don't have amnesia and I never did. I'm not Eric Belmont, and you know that as well as I do. That handy little identifying scar on my arm is my very own and distinctive. I doubt if there's an exact duplicate anywhere in the world." I adjusted my tie. "And so I ask once again, what happened to Eric Belmont?"

She was silent for half a minute and then said, "There was an auto-

mobile accident. He died in a Paris hospital."

"What made you decide that I ought to take his place?"

"Eric's father is quite ill. I felt that the shock of learning of his son's death might kill him."

I slipped into a coat. "Suppose



that I had gone through with this masquerade? After the old man died—and that would happen sooner or later—would you have let me continue being Eric Belmont?"

She met my eyes. "Why not? You would never regret it. Andrew Belmont is quite a wealthy man. And what were you when you had

another face? Answer that one."

I took one last look at the mirror. "I'm sorry for everybody, but I've got my own troubles to attend to."

She touched my arm. "I'll give you ten thousand dollars if you go through with this."

That stopped me. Ten thousand dollars? I couldn't touch any of the money in my own bank account without first proving that I was still alive and I didn't want to do that just yet. But I did need money to move around.

I lit a cigarette. "I've got Eric's face and evidently Eric's build. What about my voice?"

"I think it's close enough to pass. If it isn't, we'll find out about that soon enough."

"What made you choose me in the first place?"

"I read about your case in the local newspapers. When I received word that Eric was dead, I remembered the article and saw that you might be used to replace him."

"Why did *you* receive word of his death? Why not his father?"

"Eric evidently gave my name as the person to be notified when he was admitted to the hospital. After all, he was going to marry me and I think he felt closer to me than to his father."

"What about Eric's friends? Don't they know he's dead?"

"I'm quite positive no one but me knows that he is dead. Eric traveled to Europe alone. When the French authorities informed me of his death, I wired them that I would take care of everything . . . *everything* . . . on this end. I arranged for Eric to be quietly buried in Europe. As far as anyone else is concerned, Eric is still alive in France."

I exhaled smoke slowly. "If Eric were still alive, I could understand your concern for your prospective father-in-law. But Eric is dead."

"The Belmonts and our family have been close friends for many years. I almost feel as though Andrew Belmont were my father."

I stubbed out the cigarette. "All right, Daria. I'll give it a try."

We checked out of the hospital and went to Daria's car. The Belmont place was ten miles out of town and we made it in good time. Daria turned the car into the long driveway and parked in front of a large Norman house.

The butler met us at the door. "Nice to see you again, sir. I hope you enjoyed Europe?"

"I always do."

He looked toward Daria's car. "Shall I get your luggage, sir?"

"It will come later."

Daria and I walked up the carpeted stairs to the second floor.

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in the house or on the grounds as much as possible," she said. "After all, it's practically impossible to brief you on every incident in Eric's life—some of which I obviously don't know—and there is always the possibility that you might slip up in some way."

She stopped in front of a closed door. "You'd better go in alone first. I'll be downstairs if you feel that you might need me."

I watched her leave and then rapped on the door.

"Come in," the voice snapped.

Andrew Belmont lay in bed propped up by pillows. He was a big man, gray-templed, and he



scowled in my direction. "Who is it? Wilson?"

"Now I know you need glasses, Dad," I said. "Why keep fighting it?"

He snorted. "I can see as well as anybody. When did your plane get in?"

"Half an hour ago."

He reached for the bell cord and pulled it until a nurse appeared. "Martha, get the Scotch."

"Now, Mr. Belmont," she said half-heartedly, "you know you shouldn't," but she opened the door of the liquor cabinet.

"About two fingers for me, Martha," I said.

Andrew Belmont squinted at me. "Scotch? I thought the stuff made you sick?"

I smiled. "I'm not going to let it beat me. I'll try again and again." I waited until Martha brought us the glasses. "How are you, Dad?"

"What does it look like?" he snapped. "Have you seen Daria yet?"

"She met my plane. She's downstairs now."

"Well, invite her up. I'd like at least one intelligent person to talk to."

Daria and I stayed with him until Martha began clearing her throat and pointing surreptitiously to the clock.

I walked Daria back down to

her car. "How did I do? Any gross errors?"

"None that I noticed."

"Maybe I'm just the sensitive type, but is this the man who's supposed to get a fatal heart attack if he finds out that his son is dead?"

She slipped behind the wheel. "The relationship between Eric and his father never was a warm one on the surface, but deep down . . ."

I nodded automatically. "Deep down he's really wild about Eric."

"Of course," she said firmly. She pointed to the lights in the neighboring house at least two hundred yards away. "I live over there with my parents. Eric spent a great deal of his time with me . . . whenever he wasn't traveling."

"I wouldn't think of changing the routine."

The new moonlight was bright on her face and hell, I was her fiancée. I bent down and kissed her.

After a few moments, she drew away wide-eyed. "Don't kiss anybody else like that. She'll know for certain that you're not Eric."

When she was gone, I went back upstairs to the suite Daria had told me was mine. I wandered about, trying bureau drawers and examining closets. I tried on one of Eric's suits. It fitted fine, except that the waist could be taken in an inch or so.

In the morning I woke when someone began drawing the drapes. I regarded the small man unenthusiastically and was about to ask him who the hell he was, when I remembered my lessons.

"Damnit, Wilson," I said. "It's six o'clock."

"Yes, sir." He let in more of the pale morning light.

So I gathered that Eric got up at six, but from what I knew of him I had the feeling that it couldn't have been his own idea. I took a shower and when I came back I found that Wilson had laid out riding clothes.

I looked them over. "I guess this is my morning for riding?"

"Yes, sir," Wilson said. "Every morning."

"Anybody keeping me company?"

"No, sir. Your father, of course, isn't up to it."

"Wilson," I said, "why don't we skip the exercise this morning?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. Will you . . . ah . . . clear that with your father before I put these things away?" He waited.

It appeared that I was not the master of my own valet. "My father is a forceful man," I said.

Wilson agreed. "Yes, sir."

I sighed. "All right. Let's suit up."

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ing in the stable yard. I studied the big animal. I had been on a horse only a few times in my life, but I decided I ought to be able to handle him. I put my left foot into the stirrup, grabbed the English saddle, and swung aboard.

The bay stiffened under me and then bucked violently. I was thrown off one side onto the ground.

I got to my feet. "What the hell's wrong with him?"

The groom brought the horse under control. "I don't know, sir."

I took a deep breath and mounted again. The same thing happened, except that this time I managed to stay on five seconds longer. I swore and wiped some pebbles from the bruise on my hand. My eyes caught the open window back at the house. Andrew Belmont leaned on the sill with a pair of binoculars in his hands. I looked back at the groom and caught him trying to hide a grin.

"You've got beady eyes," I said evenly, "and I'm putting two and two together. Take off that saddle and do it now."

I watched him while he did the job, and found the sharp-edged piece of scrap iron under the blanket. "I suppose you haven't the faintest idea how this got there?"

"No, sir," he said innocently.

I strode back to the house and up to the second floor.

Belmont was in bed when I entered the room. He took a cigar from the box on the night stand. "You don't ride any better than you ever did."

I tossed the piece of metal on his bed. "I suppose this is your little idea of a practical joke?" I looked down at him. "This is as good a time as any to tell you that deep down in my quivering heart, I don't like horses."

He lit the cigar. "That's nothing new to me. You never did. But keep trying. It'll make a man of you."

"If it hasn't so far, what makes you think it ever will?"

He nodded. "You got something there."

I went downstairs and had breakfast, then spent the rest of the morning going through more drawers in Eric's suite. I came up with an extra wallet, car keys, and the combination of the wall safe. I found eight hundred dollars there, and used that to pad the wallet.

After lunch I decided that it was time to take care of some of my own personal business. I phoned the airport for plane schedules, then left the house.

A big man stepped from behind one of the trees near the garages. He stood wide-legged, hands on his hips, and sized me up. "All right, buddy," he said finally.

"Hand over the big fat wallet."

I shook my head. "Sorry, but it's a new one and I'm just getting used to it. Besides, I think you forgot to bring your gun."

"I don't need a gun, mister. Let's have the wallet and I'll let you go back to pressing flowers or whatever you do for entertainment."

I smiled. "No."

His hand reached for my shirt front, but I slapped it away. That started the action. It was short and it ended sweet when I put him down for the third time.

He sat up, breathing heavily. "Enough is enough."

I dabbed at my split lip with a handkerchief. "You're never going to make a success at this unless you get a gun or pick on smaller people."

He sighed and nodded.

"The idea of phoning the police just came to me," I said, "but I suppose I can't carry you under my arm until I find a phone?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't hold still, especially since you don't have a gun either. And now I'm going to say goodbye. Can I walk, or do I have to run?"

"Walk. It's a nice day."

After he disappeared, I stepped into the garage and found a car that fit my ignition keys. In town, I bought myself a snub-nosed .38 and drove on to the airport.

My plane landed outside St. Louis at nine that evening. I rented a car and drove out to the Blue Parrot. I had a drink at the bar, then went up the stairs to where the games were run. Things were going slow, but it was still early. I walked back toward the passageway leading to the office.

Red Atley, my floorman, stepped in front of me. He didn't know my new face. "Going someplace, mister?" he asked politely, but firmly.

"I'd like to see Duke Nelson."

"You won't find him in there."

"Why not?"

"He's too dead."

I decided to find out if I was listed as dead too. "Maybe I could see Sam Egan?"

He laughed shortly. "You're asking for all the wrong people."

"Sam's dead too?"

"No. But he's traveling these days and looking over his shoulder."

"When did all these things happen?"

He studied me. "Don't I know you?"

"No." I took a twenty out of my wallet. "I could go to the library and look all this up in the newspapers, but I like to save time."

Red pocketed the twenty. "Four months ago Sam Egan sold his half of this place to Duke Nelson."

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you so certain Egan sold out to Nelson?"

He shrugged. "That's what Duke told us, and who are we to doubt? I guess Duke had legal papers and stuff like that."

Sure, and maybe the forgeries were even good enough to pass anybody who might be interested.

Red went on. "But a week after the deal, it seems that Sam changed his mind and wanted the half back. Only Duke wasn't willing, so Egan pulled a gun and cut him down."

"You happened to see all this?"

"No. But Al Jardine and Pete Shantz were in the office with Duke when Sam went wild. The cops are still looking for him."

Fairly neat. Shantz and Jardine gun down Duke, then point the finger at a man they think they buried under twenty feet of water, and who's to know they're lying? But why kill Duke? I couldn't figure that yet.

I pointed toward the office. "Who owns the club now?"

"Mrs. Nelson."

That was news to me. "Mrs. Nelson? I didn't know Duke was married."

"It happened sudden, the day after Duke bought Egan's share of the club. Duke began celebrating, I guess, and one drink led to another and he got a little confused. This Inez isn't much of a looker."

"Inez? The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Inez Jardine. Al Jardine's sister."

I smiled slightly. So that was it. Duke had his arm twisted a little to get him to the altar and, unless Jardine's sister was the strong type, I guessed that right now it was Jardine who really controlled the club—all of it. "Is Jardine anywhere around?"

"He and Shantz usually come in later."

I went back out to my car and waited. I could make it simple from here on in. All I had to do was go to the police and tell them I had been a thousand miles away, having my face changed, when Duke Nelson was killed. Sergeant Turner had my fingerprints to back that up, and Shantz and Jardine would have a rough time explaining to the police what really happened when Duke was killed. The club would be mine.

My eyes went to the Blue Parrot. It was a nice independent little operation. Duke and I had never had anything to do with the syndicate. Yes, a nice little independent operation, but that was the trouble; little, or at least that was the way it seemed to me now.

A car drew into the parking lot and I stiffened as I recognized it.

Yes, I could go to the police,

but Shantz and Jardine had more than that coming to them—a lot more.

I slipped out of my sedan before Shantz's car came to a complete stop and walked toward it. I poked the .38 through the open window. "Just stay where you are."

They both stared at me and Shantz spoke. "What the hell is this? A holdup?"

I got into the back seat. "Start driving."

They looked at each other and Shantz shrugged. He pulled the car back onto the highway.

"Look, punk," Jardine said, "take the wallets and get it over with."

"Keep driving," I said. "I'll give the orders."

After five minutes I spoke again. "Turn right on that side road."

Shantz did as I told him.

I let him go about two hundred yards. "This is far enough. Both of you get out. Stand in front of the headlights."

I pressed the button opening the glove compartment and felt around inside. Yes, evidently Shantz liked having it around. I pulled out the piece of tire chain, stepped out of the car and relieved Shantz and Jardine of their automatics.

Shantz eyed the chain. "Look, mister, I never saw you before. What's this all about?"

I swung the chain. Shantz

screamed and dropped to his knees. His hands clawed at his face. Jardine took one wide-eyed look and began running. Maybe he was too scared to think smart, or maybe he just thought he could make better time, but he ran straight down the moonlit road.

I raised the .38. I could pick him off easy. My finger slowly applied pressure to the trigger, but then the words seemed to come from outside of me: *Don't be a fool, Sam. Don't be a fool, Eric. You've got too much to lose. Murder is still murder.*

I lowered the gun and looked down at Shantz. He was still on his knees moaning and his hands were dark with blood. I dropped the chain.

I went back to the car, drove back to the Blue Parrot, switched to my rented car and returned to the airport. When I got back to the Andrew Belmont house it was six in the morning.

Belmont, in his dressing gown, was waiting downstairs. He glared at me. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Catting," I said. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

He puffed a cigar. "I thought you might have run off to Paris or some place like that again. You always find some excuse to get away from here."

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"I was considering that, but I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to miss riding that damn horse this morning."

The phone rang and it was Daria. "Where in the world have you been? Nobody seemed to know where you'd gone."

"It's nice to know you're missed. Did you think I ran out?"

"The thought crossed my mind." She paused. "Would you like an advance on the ten thousand I promised?"

"It might help to keep me here. I'll be over after breakfast."

When I got downstairs, Andrew Belmont was at the table. Martha hovered anxiously in the back-ground.

"I got tired of eating alone," Belmont snapped.

I sat down, sipped some orange juice, and picked up the morning paper.

"Why don't we talk about business?" Belmont said dryly. "When are you going to get around to going to the office like a working man?"

"How about tomorrow?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I would have bet you'd say in a week or two. Why the sudden enthusiasm?"

"I'm a changed man. I want to learn the business from the ground up."

"Why start there? As my noble son, you're already at the top."

"But I wasn't listening before. In one ear and out the other, you know."

He took a ring of keys out of his dressing gown and slid it across the table. "They're for the Rogerson place."

I was about to ask him what Rogerson place, but instead I said, "So?"

"So take Daria over there this morning and let her have a look at it. If she likes it, I'll sign the lease."

I thought I had it now. "Our little honeymoon cottage?"

He snorted. "Twenty-two rooms. According to the agent it's all ready for occupancy, once you get around to marrying Daria. I might even buy the place for you."

After breakfast, I drove to Daria's home. Compared to the Andrew Belmont house, it was comparatively modest and a maid, not a butler, answered the door.

Daria came downstairs and got her checkbook. "We'll make it one thousand dollars. On account."

"Are you afraid I'll skip out if you give it to me all at once?"

She smiled firmly. "This way we won't run that risk, now will we?"

I put the check into my wallet. "Do you know where the Rogerson place is?"

"Yes. About a mile up the road."

Near the lake. A fine, big place."

"Let's take a look at it."

"Why?"

"Belmont's thinking of buying it. As a wedding present."

Her eyes flickered. "How nice of him."

We drove down the tree-lined winding road and turned in at the gateway of the Rogerson place. It was located in the center of a ten acre tract, half woods and half landscaped. I found the right key and unlocked the front door.

Daria stepped inside. "How charming. And it even smells fresh."

I tested a light switch and found that things worked. "According to Belmont, all we need to do is move in. The next and inevitable step to occur should be our marriage. Isn't that right, Daria? And then sooner or later, but preferably sooner, Belmont will die and leave us his money—but obviously it is still imperative that I marry you. After all, you *do* know about my impersonation."

Her face was still white. "You'll marry me so that I won't give you away? How very nice of you. How big."

I smiled again. "Don't undersell yourself, Daria. That isn't the only reason."

She reached for her handbag and removed her checkbook.

I frowned. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I still owe you nine thousand dollars," she said. She finished writing out the check and handed it to me. "Now goodbye."

I stared at the check and then at her. "Do you really expect me to walk away from five million dollars?"

"You have no choice."

"Haven't I? As far as the world is concerned, I am Eric Belmont. Only two people in the world know that I am not. You and I." I pulled the .38 from my pocket.

Her eyes went momentarily to the gun and then back to me. She waited. No pleading. No promises to do as I wanted. She just waited.

A minute seemed to pass, maybe two, and then I sighed. No, I couldn't do it—and not just because it would be murder. I tossed the gun onto an easy chair.

Her eyes widened as she stared past my shoulder. I turned—to see Andrew Belmont.

"You were standing there all this time?" I asked.

He nodded. "Just out of sight."

"You and Wilson arranged this? A practical joke?"

"Not at all." His eyes went over me. "Don't you think that a father knows his own son? I'll admit it was a good impersonation, but my suspicions were roused immedi-

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ately. The way you moved, the way you walked." He smiled slightly. "I rather enjoyed testing you. It was I who arranged for the groom to have your horse buck. You were thrown twice, but ready to try again. Eric would have quit. And that big man who met you on the grounds yesterday was my work too. Eric would have handed over the wallet or run. You did neither."

"Why didn't you turn me over to the police?"

"I was curious as to whether this deception was your own idea or a joint effort." He turned to Daria. "Very likely you were correct in assuming that I was not capable of withstanding the news of Eric's death at the time he died, Daria. But that was months ago and time heals many things, including heart tissue and muscle. I wouldn't be surprised if I were still around twenty years from now."

His eyes clouded for a moment. "I was well aware of Eric's failings and so was he, but we were quite fond of each other. However, Eric is dead and I am not the kind of a man who broods forever."

I found that my hands were still damp. "You just stood there and listened? Suppose I'd pulled that trigger?"

He grinned. "No harm done. While you were taking a shower this morning, Wilson discovered your revolver. He took the precaution of removing the bullets." He studied me. "What are you going to do now?"

There was still the business of Shantz and Jardine, but this time I would go to the police and let them handle the matter. I shrugged. "I'll go back to where I came from."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought I had your solemn word that you would report for work at the plant tomorrow morning? What the hell is your real name anyway?"

"Sam," I said. "Sam Egan."

If I stayed, it wasn't going to be because of the money at the end of the road. I met Daria's eyes.

She smiled slowly. "Shall we look over the rest of the house, Sam?"

My eyes went back to Belmont.

He lit a cigar and smiled.

